

OBEDIENCE IN THE LIFE OF THE SOCIETY OF JESUS

GC 35 DECREE 4

Mark Rotsaert, S.J.

President

Conference of European Provincials (CEP)

Some preparatory work

To be honest, obedience was not an item discussed by the province congregations before GC 35. The request to discuss the matter during GC 35 came from Father Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, at that time General Superior of the Society of Jesus. His concern was not so much the lack of obedience in the Society, but rather the need to reflect on religious obedience *year* 2008. Since GC 31 in 1965 no general congregation had tackled the issue. Nevertheless it was obvious that the context of obedience had greatly changed in our modern world and in the Church. Fresh thinking was needed. Moreover, Pope Benedict XVI, on different occasions, stressed the importance of obedience in the formation of young Jesuits, and more specifically obedience to the Pope - the fourth vow of the professed Jesuits.

Father Kolvenbach appointed a special commission to do some preparatory work to help GC 35. When the *coetus praevius*, the preparatory commission of GC 35, discussed the document on obedience made by this special commission, the following reflection was made. The document started by giving many reasons why obedience in religious life today is more difficult than in the past, and then went further, presenting obedience in the Society of Jesus emphasising the Ignatian tradition. But the link between the well documented description of Ignatian obedience and the new situation in

which we are all living today, was not worked out in detail. This was a task for the general congregation.

***Spiritual discernment or the daily hard work
in the Aula and in the Commission***

The discussion on obedience in assistancy meetings and in the aula was very animated. The delegates of GC 35 were very conscious that a Decree on obedience in the life of the Society of Jesus would have a great impact, at least in the formation of the new generations of Jesuits in our novitiates all over the world. The document had to be excellent, and not just good ! Many remarks and suggestions were made on the first draft, which was made by a small commission representing different cultures in the Society. The Commission prepared a second draft taking into account most of the suggestions which had been made, except of course, when some were contradictory... New suggestions were given to the Commission - in the aula and by internet - which made a third draft, the last one. Only written amendments were then accepted in the aula. The delegates voted yes or no to each of them. Finally, the whole text was accepted by vote.

*the vow of obedience has
to do with mission - the
mission of the individual
Jesuit, but also the mission
of the Society as a whole*

Ignatius' vision: from an ascetical to an apostolic obedience

One of the major changes made after the discussion in the aula of the first draft and the writing of the second draft, was to stress what was more specific to the vision of Ignatius on apostolic obedience. It is clear that there is in religious obedience an ascetical element. Since the beginning of Christian religious life and in the whole tradition of religious life, obedience is impossible without many exercises. Doing what another person asks you to do is not obvious, especially when it is not in line with your own view or desires. Ignatius insists on this ascetical aspect of obedience especially in Part III of the *Constitutions* where he speaks about the formation of young

Jesuits. This aspect is, of course, also present in Decree 4 of GC 35 (§ 7 and § 37).

But the typical Ignatian aspect of the vow of obedience has to do with mission - the mission of the individual Jesuit, but also the mission of the Society as a whole. It is an apostolic obedience. But to obey one of us is also a guarantee of our union of minds and hearts. Parts VII and VIII of the *Constitutions* are central in Ignatius' vision on obedience. What Ignatius expects from a formed Jesuit, is that he be a man of discernment, a man of *discreta caritas*, able to take initiatives, a man formed by the *Spiritual Exercises* always looking for 'more', *magis* (cfr § 8).

We are also well informed about the practice of Ignatius concerning the exercise of apostolic obedience. When Ignatius wanted to give a mission to a specific Jesuit and knew that the man was not looking for his own glory, that he was inwardly free, he gave him *carte blanche*. That was the

way Ignatius liked to do things. This is also true in many Letters and Instructions he wrote. For example, in 1555 he wrote a long Instruction to Juan Nuñez Barreto and the Jesuits sent to Ethiopia. Ignatius explains in a very detailed way - about ten pages - how

*Apostolic obedience
is grounded in mutual trust*

they should behave, how they should evangelise the people and the culture, who they should visit first, what kind of gifts they should bring and for whom, etc. And then, surprisingly, he starts the last paragraph as following: *All this is no more than an opinion. Don't feel you are obliged to do so. If the concrete situation asks you to handle things in another way, let yourselves be led by 'discreta caritas' and by the unction of the Holy Spirit, who is your principal guide in everything.*

This positive attitude about apostolic obedience is also present in Decree 4, especially in numbers 23 to 27, under the heading *Some Specific Aspects of the Practice of Obedience in the Society*. Let me quote : *Obedience in the Society is grounded in the desire to be sent effectively, to serve completely, and to create ever stronger bonds of union among ourselves. These three stands come together in the account of conscience (§§ 23-24).* The whole vision of Ignatius on apostolic obedience stands or falls by the way Jesuits live out this account of conscience. Apostolic obedience is grounded in mutual trust. The challenge of Ignatius' vision on obedience is

the transparency it requires from every Jesuit (§ 25). Thus, apostolic obedience is the fruit of a continuous dialogue between the superior and a Jesuit companion. A real dialogue makes creative fidelity possible (§ 27).

But the Decree goes one step further: *the practice of obedience is not limited to the relationship between the superior and the individual Jesuit. The community has its role to play* (§ 28). To stress the role of the community in the way Jesuits live their apostolic obedience, is something new in the documents of the Society. It is an aspect Jesuits today are more sensitive to. Of course, there is the discernment which grows during the dialogue between the superior and the individual Jesuit, but this discernment is linked with the communal discernment in the community. *Such discernment (in community) will help us not only to accept our personal missions but also to rejoice in and support the missions received by our brothers. In this way, our common mission is strengthened and the union of minds and hearts confirmed and deepened* (§ 28). That's the vision Ignatius describes in Part VIII of the *Constitutions*, where he writes: *This union of minds and hearts is produced in great part by the bond of obedience (...)* [659].

Apostolic obedience today

Is this apostolic obedience today more difficult than it was before? If the conditions described in Decree 4 are present, I don't think that obedience in the Society of Jesus is much more difficult than it was in former times. If there is an ongoing dialogue between the superior and the individual Jesuit, if there is mutual trust (this is also an ongoing process) - if the discernment is made by the superior and the individual Jesuit together, and if this discernment is linked with a broader communal discernment in the province and in the local community, my experience is that young Jesuits today are willing to obey.

Certainly, in many places our 'young' Jesuits today are older when they join the novitiate, they have made some higher studies and have had some social commitment. But they enter the Society not to continue their life as they had it before, but to become Jesuits. And they expect that the Society will make the best possible use of their capacities for the greater glory of God and the well-being of many. But when they experience that the mission the provincial gives them, has no link with a province plan

accepted by the province, it becomes difficult. Is this not normal? Apostolic obedience is a demanding way of living - for the individual Jesuit, as well as for the superior!

This consideration brings us to another aspect of the Decree : *Our Contemporary Context and its Challenges* (§ 18 - 22). Here also there is a very different tonality than there was in the first draft. In the first draft the contemporary context was presented in a negative way. Only the bad aspects of our modern world were described: we were living in a world which

Apostolic obedience is a demanding way of living - for the individual Jesuit, as well as for the superior

makes religious obedience nearly impossible... This section of the Decree - as a result of a communal discernment in the Congregation - starts with some *positive values prized by our contemporaries, which are essential to living religious obedience according to our Jesuit way of proceeding: respect for the human person and for human rights, willingness to engage in dialogue*

marked by freedom of expression, openness to creative alternatives, the desire to build community, and the longing to live for something greater than oneself (§18). Of course, there are also negative aspects of our modern culture, as for example *a tendency to exaggerated self-sufficiency and individualism* (§ 18) or *an exaggerated desire for autonomy* (§ 20). It is true that these aspects of modern culture have made religious obedience more difficult. And it is even true that this modern culture - positive and negative - is a part of our life (§ 20). We have to accept that our obedience will not always be as perfect, as Ignatius wanted.

Religious obedience, apostolic obedience in the Society of Jesus, makes no sense when it is not rooted in our faith in Jesus Christ, in God's love for every human being. Some sociological and psychological aspects of obedience can help us to live our religious obedience, other aspects are more like challenges we have to take on. But the foundation of our religious and apostolic obedience lies deeper. *Faith in Jesus Christ teaches us that self-realisation comes from self-giving and that freedom is not so much the power to choose as the power to order our choices towards love* (§ 19).

***The Fourth Vow of Obedience to the Pope
with Regard to Missions (§§ 30-34)***

From the beginning it was clear that a Decree on *Obedience in the life of the Society of Jesus* had to say something about the fourth vow of the Jesuits. But it was not so clear how to formulate the connection between the third vow of obedience and the fourth vow of obedience to the Pope. After the first draft was presented, the delegates asked for more clarification. The third draft gives a balanced answer to many of the criticisms which were made at the beginning of the discussion on this issue.

To understand the fourth vow the Decree goes back to the experience of Ignatius and the first companions. Ignatius defined the fourth vow as *our beginning and principal foundation*. The foundation of the Society of Jesus in 1539-1540 was the result of the vow of Montmartre in 1534, where the first companions decided to present themselves to the Pope if the journey to the Holy Land were not possible. And so it happened. They wanted to be sent by the Pope where the needs of the Church were greater. And when the Pope wanted to send them to different places, they started their *deliberatio* of 1539. During this communal discernment they decided to present their group to Pope Paul III as a new religious order.

The fourth vow expresses what is specific to the Society: total availability to serve the Church wherever the Pope sends us (§ 31). The fourth vow also makes clear the place of the Society in the Church (§ 31). The text continues with one of the most important statements in this Decree: *(The fourth vow) gives the Society structural incorporation into the life of the Church by linking its charisma as an apostolic religious order to the hierarchical structure of the Church in the person of the Pope. It is through this vow that the Society participates in the universal mission of the Church and that the universality of its mission, carried out through a wide range of ministries in the service of local churches, is guaranteed.*

In this well balanced phrase the Decree points to the specificity of the originality of the new (new in the sixteenth century) apostolic religious order. Of course, the theological vision of the Church is no longer what it was in Ignatius' time. The second Vatican Council (1962-1965) has given more weight to the local churches and to the Church as 'people of God'. The Decree stresses the universality of the mission of the Society, even when it is at the service of local churches. Even if the theology of the Church has

changed, the Society should not forget its *beginning and principal foundation*.

The fourth vow : what it is and what it is not (§§ 32-33)

The Decree also includes some helpful clarifications which were asked for by many delegates. First of all : the *matter* of the fourth vow concerns the missions given by the Pope, as it is clearly said in the sub-title: *The Fourth Vow of Obedience to the Pope with Regard to Missions*. But

*The incarnation of God
in Jesus Christ
goes on in his Church*

Ignatius has also something to say about the way we should live this vow. In the *Formula* of 1540 he writes about the vow of obedience to the Pope : *We will obey at once, without subterfuge or excuse, as far as in us lies. We pledge to do this whether he sends us among the Turks or to other infidels, even to the land they call India, or to any heretics or schismatics, or to any*

of the faithful. In general we can say that the way we will obey our superiors, as expressed in the *Constitutions* Part VI, has to be the same way we will obey the Pope. Already GC 31 made this statement, as pointed out in footnote 51.

Another clarification is the distinction between what is meant by the fourth vow and what is said in the last set of rules in the *Spiritual Exercises*: *To have the genuine attitude which we ought to maintain in the Church militant, we should observe the following rules*[352]. The Decree says clearly that *the availability promised in the fourth vow is distinct from the Ignatian spirituality of the 'proper attitude we ought to have in the Church'*. However both are rooted in the love we have for Christ our Lord... (§ 33). This is an essential aspect of Ignatius' vision of the Incarnation. The incarnation of God in Jesus Christ goes on in his Church.

The section about the fourth vow finishes by giving thanks for the *innumerable examples of generous Jesuits who offer their lives in service to the mission of Christ in his Church*. GC 35 also asks the Lord's pardon for those times when its members have been lacking in love, discretion or faithfulness in their service of the Church (§ 34). In the first draft we forgot to be grateful for so many good companions !

Obedience in Daily Life (§ 35-52)

The Decree on obedience finishes with a long section on *Obedience in daily life*. There is a first part on *Jesuits in formation*, followed by another one on *Formed Jesuits*. A third part is on *Superiors*. Also Ignatius in the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus writes first several Parts about the formation of a Jesuit and his gradual incorporation into the body of the Society, and then some Parts about the formed Jesuit who can be sent into the vineyard of the Lord. Reading these texts, the wisdom of Ignatius becomes clear: a novice who tries to live as a formed Jesuit will never become a good Jesuit, and a formed Jesuit who still lives as a novice did not derive any benefit from his formation.

Jesuits in Formation

The text stresses the need to grow in obedience and in availability. This element of growth is of course an important aspect of every formation, every training. It expresses also the conviction that everyone is able to make progress, to go further than where he is now. Without this capacity and the will to grow, any formation will be of no help. This means that the Jesuit in formation is the first who is responsible for his own formation. If he is not taking on his own formation, what can the Holy Spirit do ? What can his novice master do ?

If he wants to be prepared to be available for the mission of Christ, he will *take advantage of the opportunities for self-abnegation that community life, constant and rigorous dedication to studies and other aspects of his experience will doubtless provide* (§ 37). If a Jesuit in formation takes an active role in his formation, the *formatores* remain nevertheless of great importance. The *formatores* are not asked to be perfect - they never are - but one could expect that they will have integrated in a personal way the formation they went through. They should be men of prayer; they should know by experience how important spiritual guidance can be in the life of a Jesuit; they should have a sound intellectual background and a strong spiritual backbone and,

*the Jesuit in formation
is the first who
is responsible for
his own formation*

of course, they should love the Society which helped them to be who they are. Jesuits in formation should be able to see in their *formatores* what it means to be available for the mission of Christ. The *formatores* should live out - always in some way - what they are asking or proposing to the Jesuits in formation: *transparency with superiors, esteem for the account of conscience, the responsible exercise of personal initiative, and a spirit of discernment which accepts the decisions of the superior with good grace* (§ 38). The *formatores* should help the Jesuits in formation to grow in love for Christ's Church as well as for the Pope (§ 39).

Formed Jesuits (§§ 40-46)

The text of the Decree makes it clear that to grow in *availability* is a never ending process. Some provincials complained during GC 35 about the lack of availability. Most of the apostolic active Jesuits are working very hard, mostly in a work assigned to them by their provincial. But after several years it becomes more difficult to accept another mission. Nothing extraordinary ! It would be strange if, after many years in the same place and work, it were not difficult... But perhaps it is true for many Jesuit provinces, that it is always the same Jesuits who are available when the provincial needs someone, and always the same persons who are no longer available. We have all to grow in availability, always.

availability is a never ending process

Like in § 24 the Decree stresses again the importance of the *account of conscience* (§ 43). It is the cornerstone of obedience in the Society. And even if the account of conscience should be given to the Major Superior, it could be good to open one's conscience to the local superior. In some provinces this is not the custom. Nevertheless experience teaches us that many Jesuits - young and less young - are happy when the local superior invites them to have a conversation on a personal level. Superiors should be encouraged to do so.

Some words of gratitude are expressed to formed Jesuits of advanced years who have worked for many years in the vineyard of the Lord. Even when they are old and sick, they are participating in Christ's mission (§ 46).

Superiors (§§ 47-52)

GC 35 has greatly discussed the role of the local superior. You find some paragraphs on the local superior in the Decrees 4, 5 and 6. Where are good local superiors to be found? How are local superiors to be formed? In Decree 4 on obedience some points are touched on. Major Superiors - but also formed Jesuits (§ 44) - have to respect the scope for decision making that appropriately belongs to the local superior (§ 49). Since communication and travel is much easier nowadays, the danger exists that Jesuits go for everything to the Major Superior, thus degrading the local superior to a kind of super-minister. This happens too much as was said in the aula. Local superiors should express some leadership in the community, have a special care for the Jesuits still in formation, *collaborate with their brothers in working out and putting into practice a daily order and guidelines for common life*. All this is not new, but it seems good that all Jesuits and every community know what is the role of the local superior (§§ 51-52).

No religious obedience without faith

We have already seen that our faith in Jesus Christ is the foundation of religious obedience. Even if sociological and psychological elements are constitutive of every form of obedience, including religious obedience, they don't express fully our religious obedience, they are not the deeper motivation of religious obedience. The Decree goes into this deeper motivation in the section *Theological Aspects of Obedience* (§§ 9-17). The Decree places this section at the beginning of the Decree, after having described *The Experience of St Ignatius and the First Companions* (§§ 2-8). We will finish this article with some reflection on the foundation of religious obedience. It will give depth to all that precedes.

Our vocation is to be united with Christ in mission. We are servants of Christ's mission, says Decree 2 of GC 34. The *Spiritual Exercises* help us to grow in interior knowledge of our Lord, to love Him and to follow Him on his way [104]. At the heart of the *Spiritual Exercises* lies an ever growing love for Christ, so that we are able to accept the gift of the third degree of humility, when the Lord will give it to us [167].

To be united with Christ means that we share his relationship with the Father, his way of living, his care for the poor, the sinners, the sick, the marginalised. If we miss the relationship of Christ with the Father, we are only confronted with this wonderful man of Nazareth. Christ's life is not fully appreciated if he is only a man for others. The Gospel makes it clear: Christ is a man for others because he is a man of God. His mission is to proclaim and to live out the unending love of God for all mankind - the Kingdom of God. That is his food, that is his joy, that will be his death. Christ had no fixed program for his life, he took the reality which he encountered, moved by the love of his Father. *His fidelity to his mission brought him into conflict with human sinfulness and injustice, and it led him to death - even a death on a cross* (§ 11). Even when he became aware of a violent death, he remained faithful to his mission to proclaim God's love. In the life of Christ we see that obedience is a way of living.

That's the obedience we are called to: a way of life. It is clear that we are not able to do so if we are not united with Christ. And even when we are united with Christ, our religious obedience will never reach the standard of Christ. But united with him, our religious obedience can become a source of joy. And this joy becomes deeper and stronger since we are all called to be companions of Jesus, friends in the Lord. And so our obedience, as a way of living, becomes a sign of the resurrection of Christ - Christ, who continues to live in his Church, in everyone who believes in him.

The last paragraph of the section *Theological Aspects of Obedience* (§ 17) can easily fit at the end of this article on Decree 4 on *Obedience in the Life of the Society of Jesus*: *We will only be able to live our vow of obedience as freedom and true self-realisation if the mystical experience of passionate love for Christ, the one who is sent by the Father and who is obedient to the Father's will, remains alive in us and if we daily renew our unconditional commitment to be his companions. It is precisely our love for Jesus Christ that will make our work in service to his mission fruitful, because,...the means which unite the human instrument with God and so dispose it that it may be wielded well by his divine hand are more effective than those which equip it in relation to human beings* (Constitutions, X,1.[813]).